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## The Currency of the World

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## THE CURRENCY OF THE WORLD

MY MOTHER'S FINGERS WORRIED OVER a yellow hair ribbon. We were sitting in the kitchen. She had recently cut her long hair, and for the past few days she had played with these unnecessary ribbons, reminders of her past life.

"Eat," I said. I slid one pimento cheese sandwich across the kitchen table. There was an extra chair at the table now, a reminder of Dickie, my mother's new boyfriend. There wasn't anything wrong with Dickie; I just didn't like him. But my mother did. That was why I was moving in with my grandmother. I bit into my own sandwich.

"I'll miss having my sandwich man here," she said. She bent her head toward me. I smelled apples, the scent of her shampoo. I looked out the window at the empty parking lot.

"Ronnie, tell me something smart," she said. "Anything."

"Do you know what Abraham Lincoln said about farming?" I said. Lincoln had been born a county away from us in central Kentucky, but his birthplace was just a sign on the interstate. "He said, 'My father taught me how to farm. But he never taught me how to like it.'"

"That's a good one," she said.

The phone rang. I glared. The phone rang again. It didn't matter who was calling. I folded my hands together in front of me.

"I don't want him here," I said.

My mother ran her finger over the white tabletop. Her eyes followed her finger's movements. "He listens to me," she said. "One time we were out at the lake and I started talking about your father running off and all those times in the past. Things that don't matter now. By the time I shut up, the sun was coming up. I figured he'd be sore, or bored, but he was still listening. I could tell from the way he looked at me."

I stood up.

"This wasn't even a real offer," she said. "This was just a threat. You can't accept it. I don't allow you to."

That was what she said, but she followed me out to the parking lot. The sun was low in the sky behind us. There were a few boys playing kickball in the parking lot. They shaded their eyes with their hands. I knew we looked strange together. I was 14. My mother was 32, but appeared a little younger. We looked too close in age to be a parent and child, and too far apart to be lovers.

My grandmother, my mother and I were all the same height that June — 5-foot-7-and-a-half — but my grandmother stood a forehead above us on the doorstep. Next to her faded green house, my grandmother seemed to be boiling with color, all scrubbed red cheeks and bulging brown eyes.

“Here’s my boy,” Mee-Maw said. She licked her finger and rubbed it against my cheek. “You go on inside.”

My mother pulled me to her tightly; I could feel her breasts mashing against me. Behind her, I saw the tiny houses along my grandmother’s block.

“That’s enough now,” Mee-Maw said. My father’s last name was printed in black letters on my duffel bag — CLIDELL. I reached inside, to feel for the things that I did not want to forget: a book of coins, a newspaper ad for bras that I’d found in the school bus.

“It’s just an adjustment period,” my mother said.

“It’s always other people who have to adjust to you, isn’t it?” Mee-Maw said.

They stood there quietly for a few minutes. Then I heard my mother’s footsteps. As she drove away, the undercarriage of her car scraped against the sidewalk. Every year the rain deepened the gulch; every year the town wouldn’t do anything about it. It was something my mother always complained about.

I tossed my duffel bag on my cousin L.J.’s bed. I had slept here before, when my mother had dates, but never for more than a night.

That night, as we lay in bed together, my cousin L.J. and I played Fathers. It was a game we had devised a long time ago.

“L.J.?” I said.



"Scoot over." He was too big — 6-feet-tall and 180 pounds — to share a bed.

I slid to the edge. "So where's your father now?"

"Okay." He propped himself up on his elbow. "My father is floating off the coast of Destin. In a big white boat with a blond girl. And every morning, they wake up when they want to, and decide where they'll let the ocean take them." He played with his thin blond mustache. "Aren't you a little old for this?"

"My Dad's at Cape Canaveral, getting trained by John Glenn and Neil Armstrong," I said. "He's going to colonize the moon. Those first astronauts will be kings of the moon. They can make the rules that the other colonists will have to follow."

"Your dad's in the Army, genius. He was at Fort Knox."

"The people in the Air Force told him he could do both."

L.J. sat up. The sheet slid down his chest. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Waiting for my mother to wake up," I said.

"Obviously you don't know much about romance."

There was silence, before I broke it. "Did you hear about Jimmy Reston's dad?" I said. Our game always turned to putting down other people's fathers. "He was driving his rig back from Cincinnati and he got in early, so he thought he'd surprise everyone. Boy did he surprise them. He caught his wife in bed with Mark Armistead. Then he beat them both with an aluminum bat. Jimmy said the bat made a hollow sound when it hit."

L.J. leaned back in the bed. "Well, Debbie Musial's father was chasing after one of his daughter's boyfriends and stepped in an irrigation ditch. Now he has to wear a cast for six weeks."

"Who's the boy?"

"I ain't telling." L.J. rolled over so that he faced the wall. I had seen Mee-Maw scrubbing the peach-colored makeup stains out of L.J.'s collars. Those girls must have scraped their cheeks against him awfully hard. I wanted to masturbate.

"But you should have heard Mr. Musial yell when he landed," L.J. said. Then he laughed, and I did too.

The sharp rapping of Mee-Maw's knuckles on the wooden door woke me the next morning. "Grass is growing," she said. "Rise and shine."

"I'll get up when you shut up," L.J. said, not too loud.

I made my way to the table for bacon and eggs.

"You wash your hands before you eat," Mee-Maw said to me.

I opened my book of coins. There was a princess pictured on an old twenty-shilling piece from Barbados who looked my mother, but I couldn't find anyone who looked like Mee-Maw. She didn't have the kind of face you'd want to carry around in your pocket.

I picked a slab of bacon from my plate and bit into it. My grandmother pulled a stack of crinkled papers, bound by a thin gray string, from her purse. It was my report card. She started to read it to me. "Daydreams in class," she said. "You're daydreaming right now, aren't you? You know what you need? You need something to do."

She walked back to L.J.'s door. "Get up before the grass gets past your ankles."

I heard the creaking of bedsprings. Then L.J. opened the door.

"You could at least be decent," Mee-Maw said.

L.J. shook his head at me. I felt ashamed of my boyish obedience at the kitchen table. I set my bacon back on my plate. When L.J. nodded to me, I followed him.

"You can't listen to her," L.J. said. "She's just mad about the things she's done. You and I are just grass under the blade. We're just what's in the way."

My grandmother stood behind the screen door and studied our every movement. When she glared at us like that, I could not imagine that there were any mistakes in her past worth making up for.

That morning, we mowed the lawns of all the neighbors Mee-Maw favored: the old sisters across the street, who held the drapes back so they could check on our progress; the amputee, who lived down the block; the widowed mechanic next door, who had a 16-year-old daughter named Laura Ann. Mee-Maw never asked these people if they wanted their yards cut, and she never took any money from them. But there were two houses we did not mow because their occupants were having an affair. For all



these reasons, I believed we were the aristocrats of our street. I held my head in what I thought was a haughty pose.

While we mowed, Laura Ann lay propped up on one elbow on her father's lawn. The blue pages of *Seventeen* flashed up from the grass. L.J. kept to the far side of her yard. He slowed down and pointed at the edge of the lawn. "See how I ran the wheel over the last row we cut? Don't leave any ridges. She goes crazy if she sees ridges."

Laura Ann rolled over into the fresh-mown grass when we drew up close to her. The cuttings stuck to her t-shirt.

"Leonard," she said. Somehow her dark red shirt blended perfectly with the light brown soil and green grass. "Ain't that your real name?" She smiled. I saw that her teeth had yellowed near the gumline. She saw me looking and shut her mouth. A light bloom of acne fluttered underneath her short black bangs, but with those exceptions, she was lovely, with long, muscular legs and tanned, smooth skin. Her face was almost beautiful, but her nose and her eyes were too large for her narrow cheeks.

"Think I could pose like this?" she said. She turned the magazine so we could see a soft drink ad that showed a girl in a blue bikini on a white beach.

"I bet you do." L.J. winked at her, then pushed the lawnmower back to our yard.

She watched him walk away. "I don't belong in any magazine," she said to me. "I like to call him Leonard, 'cause I know it's his name. I heard his grandmother call him that one time. Most people don't know that L.J.'s not his name." She stood and brushed the grass from her belly, and then she walked to her house. Her copy of *Seventeen* was lying in the grass. Once I saw her door close, I scooped up the magazine and carried it inside.

"Why don't you go after her?" I asked L.J. later. "She likes you."

"What would I do with her?"

"I don't know," I said. "What do you do with the other pretty girls?"

"Pretty?" he said. "You'd think so."

He turned on the radio. We heard a sappy love song. L.J. mouthed the words and closed his eyes. At times like this, when he seemed handsome and desirable and capable of shutting out

the world with just a radio, I wanted to be just like him. To be him, in fact. But I knew that I couldn't.

I was reading through my book of coins, sitting in bed. Mee-Maw was standing in the doorway.

"You know what a book is?" she said. "Ink on a page. If they arranged the ink a different way, it would be the Bible. Or a poison pen letter. It doesn't mean anything."

I kept reading. I was used to being left alone.

"You want to see a coin?" she said. "Here's one."

She tossed a quarter. It bounced on the bedspread and slid onto the floor. She tossed a penny, and then a dime, and then another quarter. She was tossing them a little harder, purposely hitting me on the elbow, plunking them against the wooden headboard.

"Stop it," I said.

"This is real," she said. "This can hurt you."

I heard a car scrape against the sidewalk, then the screen door close. I rolled toward L.J., so she wouldn't know I was listening. In the quiet of the house, I could hear Mee-Maw and my mother talking in the living room.

"He's a daydreamer," Mee-Maw said. "Did you even read his report card?"

"Didn't you ever get a B-minus?" my mother said.

"I've been a B-minus my whole life, and so have you, and so has L.J. Not just in school."

I slipped on a white t-shirt and walked into the living room. The Groucho Marx Show played on the TV. Groucho shook ash from his cigar onto his long wooden desk. My mother slouched at one end of the long green couch. Mee-Maw sat in her chair. I slid in next to my mother. I smelled the apples in her hair.

"Do you like my hair?" she said. "It's a new me."

"You had it cut before I left."

"I'm just the same then, I guess."

We all turned to the television. Groucho gave one of his nyuk-nyuk laughs. Mee-Maw clicked off the television. "It's time for you to go to bed, Ronnie."



"Good night, Ronnie," my mother said. "Think about things."  
I walked into the bedroom and stood in the doorway, listening.

"Close the door," L.J. said. "There's no good in listening to them." I walked across the floor quietly, so I could hear their last words.

"You're impossible," my mother said.

"Life's impossible," Mee-Maw said. "I'm just the truth."

My mother slammed the door. I waited for the sound of her starting the Pinto, the thunk-scape of her pulling away from me.

Laura Ann tapped her fingernail on the screen door. "Is your grandmother home?" she said.

I shoved her *Seventeen* magazine under the couch, tucking my bra advertisement inside. I had watched Laura Ann sunbathe on the lawn all month. I imagined her in all those magazine poses when I masturbated.

"I just had to ask her a question," Laura Ann said. "Where's L.J.?"

"Out with some girls."

"He's just sowing his oats," she said. "He'll come back to me when he's done. That's what men do. They boomerang. That's what makes them men."

"Did you know I've read more books than Abraham Lincoln did in his whole life? It's not that impressive." And truly, she didn't seem impressed. "Most people have. He just liked to read a few books over and over, that's all."

"So?" she said.

"Did you know you're talking to a future ambassador to France?" I don't know why I said France. I could just as easily have said Malaysia, or Atlantis.

She rolled her eyes. "Say something in French then," she said.

"I can't."

Just then, we heard the scrape of a car on the sidewalk. My grandmother's cloudy Rambler pulled up the driveway.

"Mrs. Nattes, I just wanted to see if I could get some flour



from you," Laura Ann said when Mee-Maw joined us. "I'm trying to make some biscuits for my father."

"Just a minute," Mee-Maw said. She carried the amputee's laundry into the kitchen, where she and Laura Ann talked. "Honey, you need to get your mind off L.J. If I were you, I'd find a boy who liked me, instead of chasing everywhere after some boy I like. I'm not saying this out of meanness." I wasn't sure if I believed her or not.

My mother rolled down the window of her Pinto. "Are you coming to visit or not?" she said. She was parked on the street. "I didn't want to wreck the car by pulling it up the driveway. You know I hate the way the sidewalk scrapes."

I carried the book of coins out to the car. "Let me show you something," I said. "You look just like her." I pointed to the Barbados coin.

My mother turned to look at the page. She ran her finger along the edge of the princess' face. Then she laughed.

"You've been reading about too many politicians," she said. "You're full of promises."

I looked again at the book. Now that I had them both side by side, my mother didn't look like the princess. Mom's skin was yellow, not copper. There were gray strands in her brown hair. And her expression wasn't regal. More like a smirk.

"Let's go," I said. When we got to our apartment buildings, they looked more drab than I remembered, with their dark red bricks and their brown paneling around the windows. All the curtains were drawn tight.

A few lamps had been set up in the corners of our apartment. And another chair had been added to the table, but the room didn't look much different. It was the smell that was new, something masculine and sweaty and disgusting to me. I thought I was choking.

"Can't we open a window?" I said. "It stinks in here."

"Let me get you a Coke," my mother said. "I don't know if I should say this to you, but I've been enjoying myself." She placed my Coke on the table. "I wish you were here, of course." She took a sip from her own drink. Her lipstick smudged the edge of the glass.

"I'm going to be ambassador to France," I said.

"Oh, really?" she said. "And what am I going to wear to your balls?"

"If you're invited."

"Fine," she said. "If." Later we walked back to the car without saying anything.

L.J. dropped his summer school World History book on his TV tray. It wobbled on its stand. "Let me show you something," he said.

"Shouldn't you keep studying?" I said. "You have a test on Friday." He had to retake World History and French during the summer, to make up for his F's.

L.J. carried a copy of a girlie magazine into the living room. It had a bright white cover showing a naked woman pinching one nipple. She seemed to float in midair. I closed my geometry notebook. Why did these women look so bored? Didn't they know that men, that boys, would be staring at them?

Neither L.J. nor I spoke, but I could hear his breathing. I'm sure he could hear mine. Finally, he flipped to the middle, where a woman drove her car into a mechanic's shop, and immediately stripped down. Then they simulated sex in the backseat. I imagined all the women in France.

"You've never seen anything like that up close, have you?" he said. "It'll make you forget those books, I bet."

"And you have?"

He showed his sharp white teeth when he smiled. Then he looked out the window. "Look at Laura Ann," he said. She was standing on the sidewalk, talking to a boy in a blue sedan. She leaned toward the boy so she could hear him better.

"I hate her," I said.

"You don't have to hate somebody just because they disappoint you," he said. He carried the magazine back to our bedroom.

I ran my hands over the brown leather cover of my book of coins. That smooth cover felt like money to me. The title of the book, *The Currency of the World*, was printed in embossed gold letters. The pages were slick. I touched all the famous men and



women there. I liked every part of the book, except the American section. Who cared about seeing a print of Abraham Lincoln's face on a penny? I could see one of those in my pocket. The ones I liked were from places far away, like Barbados, or France.

A strange metallic clink drifted through the windows from Laura Ann's house. I walked to the porch.

Laura Ann's father was kneeling on his sidewalk over a huge mound of coins. He flicked the nickels, dimes, and pennies into separate piles with his fingers. With each flip, he murmured a number. He was counting his coins. "Fifty-seven" for dimes. "Seventy-two" for nickels. "Eighty-one" for pennies. I had never heard anything like the noise of metal on metal when they settled into their rightful places. One of his tosses missed its mark, smacking seven nickels into some dying shrubs in his flower garden. His fingers rooted through the dirt for the coins.

Laura Ann walked out of the house. I expected that she would talk to him, but instead she stepped carefully over his hands, not looking down at him.

"What are you doing for the Fourth?" she said when she got over to our house. She just wanted to find out about L.J.

"When did you go mute?" Laura Ann said. "I thought you wouldn't shut up."

"We're all going to be at the lake, okay? I don't feel like talking to you."

"You're always the one trying to talk to me." The truth of it made everything seem worse.

"At least I'm not a whore," I said. I made my hand into a fist, not because I was mad at her.

She drew in her breath, as if to yell, but she spoke quietly. "It'll take more money than you'll ever have, Mr. Ambassador." On her way back to her house, she knelt down in front of her father. They spoke briefly, then she went inside. Her father was still sorting his coins.

Mee-Maw spread an old quilt on the dry ground. She placed her picnic basket in the center. Then she faced the lake. There were only a few people at the park this early for the Fourth of July picnic. The wind raised small waves in the middle of the lake.



"We used to have a great big house out here, my daddy and my sisters did," she said. She pointed toward a small bay at the far end of the lake. Leafy bushes grew up from the edge of the shore and stretched out over the water. "I used to live there, just like my sisters did. I watched them fill up this little valley, just a few inches of water an hour. First our windows, then the rooftop, then the chimney. They were going to flood south of here, but somebody was worried it would cover Lincoln's birthplace. Nobody cares about my birthplace."

The wind brushed her hair into her eyes. "There are so many weaknesses. Men, and girls, and sloth in all my children, and all my children's children."

Mee-Maw turned her stare on me. "L.J.'s going to be gone in a year," she said. "And then you and I are going to chase that weakness out of you."

A warm wind blew across the lake and made me shiver.

L.J. kicked the picnic basket open and took out an apple turnover. "Figures we'd find the glum twins here," he said.

"You wash your hands?" Mee-Maw said. L.J. ignored her.

My mother held Dickie's wrist in her hand as they walked up. He was her old boyfriend from high school, just out of the service and just divorced. He fingered his curly hair and his long beard without seeming to notice where we were.

"I've got one for you, Bub," he said when he sat down. I hated being called Bub. "Knock knock. Julius Caesar."

My mother nudged me with her elbow. "Julius Caesar who?" my mother said.

"Julius sees her in her underpants," he said. He raised his eyebrows. My mother slapped his arm and let her fingers stay there.

"Ha. Ha. Ha," I said.

"Brighten up," my mother said. "Please?"

Mee-Maw passed out pork chop sandwiches to everyone, starting with me.

"Didn't we have some big times at this lake in high school?" my mother said to Dickie. "We used to lay out for hours in the sun and then dance when it turned dark." She tapped L.J. on his knee. "What do you folks do out here?"

"Nothing good," L.J. said. He smiled.

"Young people think they invented everything," my mother said. "Ronnie will be next."

Mee-Maw scraped some crumbs off the blanket. She was staring at me, waiting.

"When I came back from the war, I used to walk around this lake for hours," Dickie said. "I'd watch the sky reflected on its surface, and try to figure out what to do next. What do you see when you look in the lake, Bub?"

"Nothing," I said. "I don't look down."

My mother touched me lightly on my shoulder, shocking me. But she didn't seem to have felt the jolt. "You're so serious," she said.

"Don't touch me," I said, "with Dickie's hand."

"What a joke," L.J. said. He walked off toward his friends, who were gathered around bright red pickup trucks in the parking lot.

"Talking things out is a good thing," Dickie said.

We all sat facing each other. It was getting dark. The first fireworks exploded behind us, and applause drifted from the crowd. Five, six, seven blasts sprung into the air in shades of red, blue, green, and yellow. The ashes dimmed when they returned to the water, dark spots splashing near the silvery reflection of the moon in the lake's center.

As the fireworks exploded, Dickie and my mother held hands. Her fingertips curved over his hairy knuckles. She rubbed her fingers in small circles, without seeming to notice what she was doing.

Then the fireworks stopped. There was silence interrupted only by the distant sound of sleeping bags being zipped shut, until my mother touched my shoulder.

"Ronnie's going to be ambassador to France," my mother said to Dickie. "Won't that be fun?"

"Why not Italy?" he said. "You'll like the food better."

"Don't talk to me," I said. "You don't care about me." I pointed at my mother. "You just want to run around and still have me waiting for you." I turned to Mee-Maw. "And you just want me to make up for your failures. You're all being selfish."



My mother squeezed tighter on Dickie's hand. He winced but he did not move. "I'll buy that," my mother said. "But what about you, Ronnie? Aren't you being selfish too? It's that way with everyone, with everything."

"Please stop talking," I said. I covered my ears.

Cars started in the distance. Horns honked their farewells. Dickie looked from eye to eye, but we were all of us silent.

We walked to the parking lot without saying a word. My grandmother climbed into her old Rambler. My mother stood near the Pinto. Dickie sat in the driver's seat.

"You're my son, but you're not an altar for me to sacrifice to," my mother said.

"Get in," Mee-Maw said. I sat down in the passenger's seat and shut the door.

"Tomorrow we're going to start learning French," Mee-Maw said. "Do you know a single word of it?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Neither do I. But we'll study."

Dickie was listening to the Pinto's radio. His head was moving up and down in time to a song I couldn't hear. He started to drive away, very slowly. My mother was staring out the far window at the highway. Beside me, Mee-Maw was chattering about our French lessons. It was clear to me that this car, the one I sat in, was reality, and that across the parking lot the car where Dickie and my mother sat was as fake as a dream. The choice I made was going to be that simple.

I chose the lie. As I ran to the Pinto, my mother reached back and opened the rear door. I didn't look up until we were at least a mile away from that lake. My mother didn't say anything. Dickie didn't say anything either.

On July the fifth, my mother and I went by Mee-Maw's house to pick up my things. The block was silent. Mee-Maw and L.J. were both gone, on purpose, I'm sure.

"I don't trust you to go in yourself," my mother said. "You might get nostalgic and want to stick around." She bit her bottom lip when she saw that I didn't laugh.

"You're going to get used to us," she said. "You won't even



remember anything else.” She touched my cheek. I let her finger stay, but I didn’t look up.

“I guess,” I said. Inside the house, we packed quickly. After I stowed my clothes, I flipped through my book of coins and looked again at the Barbados page, at that princess. The picture hurt me; the princess in the picture was better than my mother. I tossed the book on my cousin’s bed, where I knew Mee-Maw would find it.

“You love that book,” my mother said.

“I used to,” I said. We walked to the house.

Over at Laura Ann’s house, there were little trenches in the flowerbed where her father’s fingers had rooted for dropped coins. Seeing her house hurt me more than seeing my grandmother’s. I knew that I had to apologize. As I stood on her doorstep, I devised a little speech to tell her that I did not mean to hurt her feelings. I was still practicing when Laura Ann opened the door.

“I saw L.J. at the lake,” she said. “And you, and your mother, Mr. Ambassador.”

She smirked at me; she was making fun of me; I wanted to hurt her.

“He said you were stupid,” I said. “He said he doesn’t like you anyway.”

“You’re an asshole,” she said.

“You’re dreaming,” I said. “Wake up.”

Laura Ann closed her window, dropped the shade. My mother was sitting in her Pinto, singing to the radio. She waved to me. I waved back. I stayed on Laura Ann’s porch a little longer, thinking of all the kind things I meant to say to Laura Ann, about the kind of person I might be if I could say them, but I did not know how. My mother honked her horn, and I walked down the steps toward her.